

Everything to Everyone and the Conditioning Effect of Intra-party Cohesion: A Replication in a Cross-national Context

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Accepted for publication in *Party Politics*.

Please cite as:

Lin, Nick and Roni Lehrer. 2021. "Everything to everyone and the conditioning effect of intraparty cohesion: A replication in a cross-national context." *Party Politics* 27(5): 909–916. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820918780>.

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Abstract

Taking the intra-party politics perspective, Lehrer and Lin (forthcoming) recently re-visit Somer-Topcu's (2015) work that demonstrates how being ambiguous can help parties expand support in elections. Using a panel survey data from Germany, Lehrer and Lin find that intra-party cohesion is a critical moderator of Somer-Topcu's argument. While Lehrer and Lin's results are of relevance to a wide literature on party competition, intra-party politics, and political representation, their empirical strategy of relying on only one country prohibits other researchers from drawing meaningful and generalizable conclusions. In this note, we join this literature and re-evaluate Lehrer and Lin's conjecture by using an innovative cross-national survey data that covers twelve European countries. With this comparative data set, we almost perfectly replicate what Somer-Topcu and Lehrer and Lin reveal in their works. Our empirical endeavor not only provides a solid empirical ground to Lehrer and Lin in a cross-national context, but also has important implications for future research, particularly on electoral politics, party competition, and democratic representation.

Keywords: Party Ambiguity, Intra-party Coherence, Political Representation

Word count: 3200

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The clarity of a party stance plays a critical role in political competition and political representation as it enables citizens to form lucid expectations about future party behavior and to hold parties accountable (APSA 1950; Powell 2000). Since Downs’s seminal work (1957), scholars have intensively investigated what motivates parties to becloud or to elucidate their policy goals (Alesina and Cukierman 1990; Argones and Neeman 2000; Meirowitz 2005; Rovny 2012; Jensen and Lee 2017; Eichorst and Lin 2019; Han 2020) and the electoral implications of the strategies of being ambiguous or unequivocal (Shepsle 1972; Campbell 1983; Bartels 1986; Glazer 1990; Argones and Postlewaite 2002; Gill 2005; Callander and Wilson 2008; Aldrich et al. 2018; Martin 2019). In this body of work, several recent empirical studies reveal consistent evidence that embracing an ambiguous policy platform helps parties expand their electoral support (Tomz and Van Houweling 2009; Lo, Proksch and Slapin 2016; Bräuninger and Giger 2018). In particular, Somer-Topcu (2015, henceforth ST) traces a mechanism back to voters underestimating the policy distance between themselves and a party that appeals broadly. In other words, in the context of proximity voting, the “everything to everyone” strategy works effectively by making citizens believe that the ambiguous party is ideologically close to them (see also Martin 2019).

In their recent work, Lehrer and Lin (forthcoming, henceforth LL) re-visit ST’s argument from the perspective of intra-party politics (e.g., Ceron 2012; Kam 2009; Greene and Haber 2015; van der Wardt 2012) by investigating the electoral consequences of German parties’ broad appeal strategies, and they conclude that the “everything to everyone” strategy is not a panacea that always boosts electoral support. Specifically, LL argue that policy ambiguity can be a result of, on the one hand, a party strategically making ambiguous policy statements. On the other hand, it can also arise when factions within the party propose concrete, yet, conflicting policies.¹ To LL, the crucial difference lies in whether voters are able to recognize that a party’s policy intentions are foiled by the party’s conflicting policy messages. LL contend that voters are more likely to realize such conflicting situations when the party is internally fighting as internal conflicts inform voters about the party’s true policy intentions. As a consequence, voters are less likely to underestimate the policy distance to the ambiguous party and to grant it support when they see the party fighting internally, while they are more likely to do so when intra-party

¹Of course, intra-party conflict need not be policy-related. It can also deal, for instance, with decisions on staffing or forming coalitions. As a result, intra-party conflict need not imply policy ambiguity (Lehrer and Lin forthcoming: 3).

conflicts are absent.²

LL contribute to the literature by advancing the scholarly understanding of how the effect of a particular electoral strategy of parties is conditional on political contexts. However, while LL's work has great implications for future research on a wide range of topics of comparative politics, such as party competition, political representation, and electoral behavior, an obvious limitation of their contribution is the number of countries, political contexts, and parties they were able to study. Relying on German data only clearly prohibits researchers from drawing generalizable conclusions that are meaningful in other countries with different electoral contexts.

In this note, we re-test LL's argument using an original cross-national survey in twelve Western and Eastern European countries. With this comparative data set, we follow LL's empirical strategy to replicate both ST's and LL's findings. Our analyses reveal almost identical results to what LL presented in their work: party ambiguity indeed reduces a voter's perception of the ideological distance between herself and the ambiguous party, but this effect is significantly diminished, and even reversed, when the voter considers the party as internally divided. In other words, an ambiguous policy platform, as a consequence, could be electorally harmful when the party is internally fighting. These results imply that the circumstances under which parties choose vague or concrete policy stances (or other types of campaign strategies) condition the success of these strategies in all sorts of (parliamentary) democratic systems.

Data and Methods

To re-evaluate LL's findings in a comparative context, we commissioned surveys in twelve countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.³ These countries are selected as they cover a wide range of party systems, institutional set-ups in elections, government types, and policy-making patterns. Replicating LL's findings successfully in such a diverse contexts, therefore, implies that LL's conclusion is not context-driven, and it represents a substantial element of party politics and voting behavior.

Moreover, to make our surveys comparable to the German Internet Panel (GIP) survey LL

²For the detailed theoretical discussion, please see Lehrer and Lin (forthcoming: 2).

³These surveys were conducted by Survey Sampling International through their representative internet panels. Each survey was translated by paid translators at the SSI and was implemented in each country's official language. The surveys were launched in the end of January 2019 and finished by mid February 2019.

employed in their work, we asked the same questions in these surveys.⁴ In particular, each respondent was asked to place herself and a list of parties on an 11-point left-right scale and to evaluate to what extent these parties are unified or divided using an 11-point scale. To our knowledge, this is the very first cross-national survey that asks respondents to assess party unity.⁵ As a result, the survey will allow us to produce exactly the same dependent variable and the major explanatory variables that were employed in both ST's and LL's contributions.

This cross-national survey contains answers to our survey items from 19,569 respondents. As each survey item requires a respondent to evaluate multiple parties, the respondent will appear as many times in the data as she places parties. The unit of analysis is therefore a respondent-party dyad. Overall, the survey covers 92 parties from 12 countries, which results in a sample of 133,475 respondent-party dyads.⁶ To account for potential bias arising due to contextual differences, we estimate a hierarchical linear model with random intercepts at both the country-level as well as the party-level. Summary statistics and the parties included in the analyses are presented in the appendix in section A4 and A5.

Replication of Somer-Topcu (2015)

As a first step, we replicate ST's individual-level findings using our new data set. This is an important step because a successful replication of ST's findings allows us to ultimately communicate to LL on the same empirical ground. To reiterate, according to ST, the reason why the broad appeal strategy helps political parties electorally is because it targets different groups of voters and at the same time convinces these voters that the ambiguous party is ideologically closer to them than other parties. The proposed mechanism at the individual level thus can be summarized as the following hypothesis:

ST's Broad Appeal Hypothesis: The voter's perception of the ideological distance between herself and a focal party decreases when the policy ambiguity of the party increases.

To perform the replication, the corresponding dependent variable is a respondent i 's per-

⁴Full description of these items are documented in the appendix A1.

⁵Of course, the replication materials will be made available to the public once the manuscript is published. We believe doing so would benefit the scholarly community by supplementing the increasing supply of data on parties' internal deliberations.

⁶To make our models comparable to that of ST's and LL's, we exclude observations with missing values on the key variables.

ceived absolute distance between herself and a focal party j in country k (Perceived Distance $_{i,j,k}$). The major explanatory variable is a two-way interaction term of (1) the distance between a respondent i 's self-placement and a party j 's mean placement by all respondents in a country (Actual Distance $_{i,j,k}$)⁷ and (2) a rescaled version of van der Eijk's (2001) agreement measure that captures to what extent respondents in a country disagree on a party j 's policy position (Policy Ambiguity $_{j,k}$).⁸ The latter variable is a proxy for the level of policy ambiguity of political parties. Greater numbers of perceptual disagreement suggest that, at the individual level, voters have diverse understandings of where a party stands in the ideological spectrum (Sommer-Topcu 2015: 845). Theoretically, while Actual Distance is positively associated with Perceived Distance, it is expected that Policy Ambiguity mitigates the positive relationship between Actual Distance and Perceived Distance.

Following ST, we also control for a set of factors that are likely to affect how close a respondent perceives a party to be. We include three dummy variables indicating if the party was in government while the survey was in field (Government Party $_{j,k}$), whether it is a niche party (Niche Party $_{j,k}$),⁹ and whether the respondent voted for this party at the most recent general election (Partisan Supporter $_{i,j,k}$). Further, we include a variable that captures a party's vote share at the most recent general election (Vote Share $_{j,k}$) as well as respondents' self-reported interest in politics (Political Interest $_{i,k}$).¹⁰ The full estimated results are documented in Table A2.1 in appendix A2.

To facilitate the interpretation of our replication of ST's major conclusion, in Figure 1 we plot the marginal effect of Actual Distance on Perceived Distance, conditional on different levels of party Policy Ambiguity. The solid line indicates the estimates and the dash lines represent

⁷ST uses party placements by CSES experts to locate the "true ideological position" of political parties. The only expert data available for the time-period of interest is the 2017 Chapel Hill Expert FLASH Survey (CHES, Polk et al. 2017), yet it only covers nine of the twelve countries we study in this note. To fully make use of our surveys, we follow LL and use respondents' mean placements as an alternative and we report the results based on the CHES data as robustness checks in appendix A3. The substantive conclusion derived from our analyses is essentially identical using either measure.

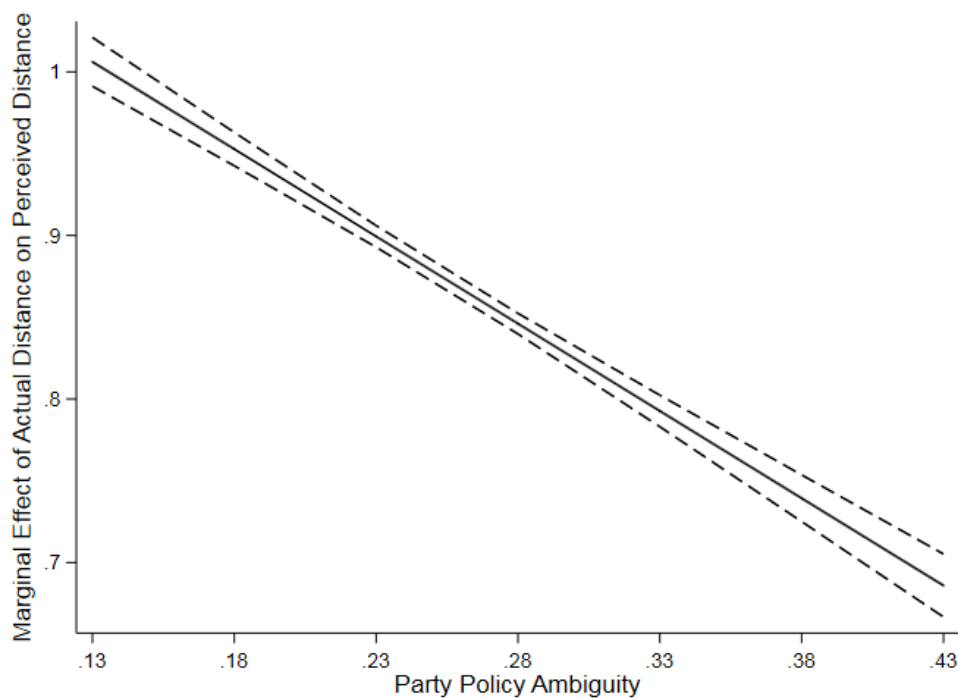
⁸Following ST and LL, we rescale van der Eijk's (2001) agreement score (a) as follows: disagreement = $(-0.5*a) + 0.5$. It thus theoretically ranges from 0 to 1 where 0 means that all respondents place the party identically (i.e., level of ambiguity is very low), and 1 indicates a uniform distribution of answers over answer categories (i.e., level of ambiguity is very high).

⁹ST controls for single-issue parties instead of niche parties. Her measurement of single-issue parties relies on manifesto data collected by the MARPOR team. Since our data are recent, MARPOR has not published data on the relevant manifestos yet. Instead, we follow Ezrow (2008) and code nationalist, green, and communist parties as niche parties that rarely compete on the left-right dimension like regular mainstream parties.

¹⁰Both ST and LL use education as a control variable. Unfortunately, this variable is not available in our data. Yet, both authors argue that better educated respondents may be more knowledgeable about parties' true positions. Since the same rationale holds true for respondents with high levels of political interest, we control for political interest instead.

the 95% confidence interval. The figure essentially shows how voters translate actual policy distances between themselves and a given party into perceived policy distances at different levels of party policy ambiguity. As one may immediately observe, at the lowest observed level of party policy ambiguity (i.e., ambiguity=0.13, meaning that the party is highly unequivocal), voters translate actual policy distances into perceived policy distances almost perfectly using a 1:1 ratio given one on the y-axis is included in the fairly slim 95% confidence interval. Yet, this perfect translation declines when party policy ambiguity increases. At the highest observed level of party policy ambiguity (i.e., ambiguity=0.43), one can see that voters underestimate the actual ideological distance severely. As the coefficient of 0.69 indicates ([0.67; 0.71] as the 95% confidence interval), voters on average perceive a party to be about 30% closer than it actually is when the party’s policy messages are ambiguous.¹¹

Figure 1. Marginal Effect of Actual Distance on Perceived Distance, conditional on Party Ambiguity (Replication of Somer-Topcu (2015, Figure 2))



Overall, we are able to replicate ST’s findings almost precisely using our cross-national survey data. Most importantly, the substantive conclusion drawn in ST from her individual level analyses can be drawn from our analyses as well: When a party’s policy stance is ambiguous, voters tend to underestimate the policy distance between themselves and that party. This particular replication therefore allows us to scrutinize if, as LL argue, perceptions of party

¹¹A one standard deviation increase (decrease) of party policy ambiguity increases (decreases) the underestimation by about 5 ([3; 4] as 95% CI) percentage points.

unity condition the perceived ideological distance between voters and political parties that appeal broadly.

Replication of Lehrer and Lin (forthcoming)

LL extend ST’s work by arguing that a beclouded policy platform alone does not suffice to make a voter underestimate the distance between herself and a given party. They add party coherence to ST’s proposed mechanism and suggest that when the voter perceives a party as internally fighting, the advantage of being ambiguous vanishes since intra-party conflict accentuates the party’s true policy intentions and its true location in the ideological spectrum. In other words, party unity conditions how policy ambiguity shapes voters’ perceptions of the policy divergence between themselves and political parties, and the “everything to everyone” strategy works more effectively (i.e., the effect is greater) when a party is perceived to be unified than divided. We recapitulate LL’s argument in the following hypothesis:

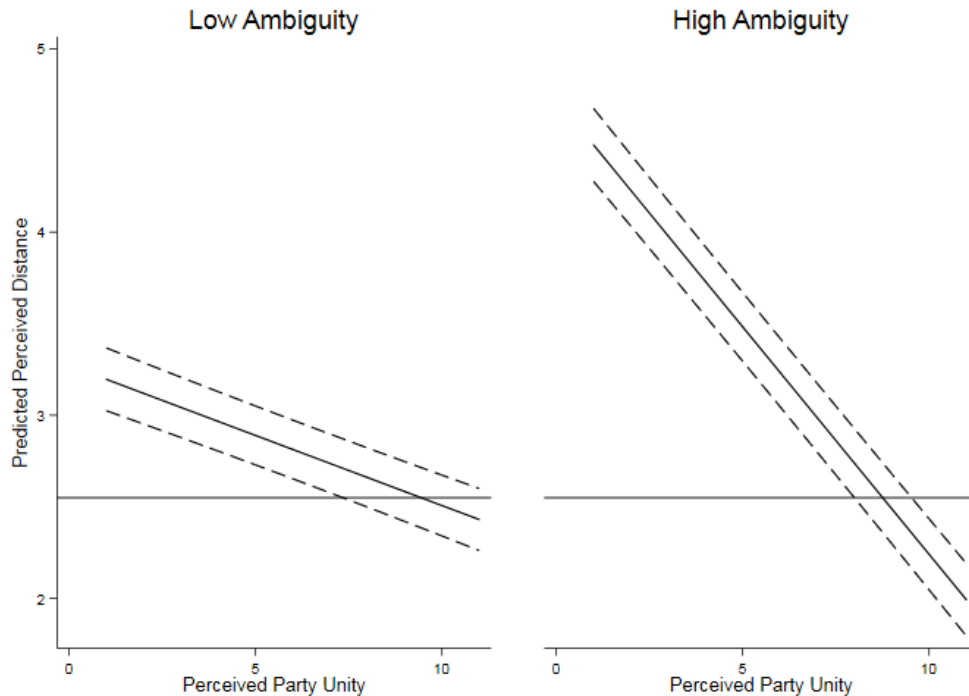
LL’s Conditional Hypothesis: When a party employs the broad appeal strategy (i.e., as policy ambiguity increases), the voter’s perception of the ideological distance between herself and the party decreases as her perception of the unity of the party increases.

LL present supportive empirical evidence for this claim by estimating a slightly modified version of ST’s model with survey data from Germany. They generate a three-way interaction term by multiplying the two-way interaction term that ST employed (i.e., Actual Distance * Policy Ambiguity) by a variable that captures a respondent i ’s perception of the extent to which a party j is unified (Perceived Party Unity $_{i,j,k}$). The expectation is that Perceived Party Unity conditions the mitigating effect of Policy Ambiguity on the relationship between Actual Distance and Perceived Distance. The negative effect of Policy Ambiguity gets stronger when Perceived Party Unity increases. With the same set of control variables described above, we replicate LL’s models and report the full estimated results in Table A2.1 in appendix A2. To make the interpretation of a three-way interaction term easier, as LL did, we calculate and plot the predicted values of the dependent variable (i.e., Perceived Distance) by fixing Actual Distance at its mean value, Policy Ambiguity at its minimum and maximum,¹² while allowing

¹²Treating Party Ambiguity as a binary variable, as LL did in their work, or replacing minimum and maximum values with the 10th and 90th percentiles do not change our main findings.

Perceived Party Unity to span from its minimum to maximum values. The estimates along with the 95% confidence interval are depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Party Ambiguity, Perceived Party Unity, and Predicted Perceived Distance (Replication of Lehrer and Lin (forthcoming, Figure 2))



Note: Results are based on Model 3 in Table A2.1 in the appendix. Low ambiguity refers to an ambiguity score of 0.13, high ambiguity to 0.43. All other variables are at their means or medians. The horizontal lines indicate the actual distance between a typical voter and a party.

As Figure 2 shows, the effect of Perceived Party Unity on the relationship between Policy Ambiguity and Perceived Distance is indeed consistent with what LL argue. In the right panel, where a party embraces the “everything to everyone” strategy, a typical voter perceives the ambiguous party that is objectively 2.55 units¹³ away from her to be 4.5 ([4.3; 4.7] as 95% CI) units away when she considers the party to be internally divided. Yet, the perceived distance between the voter and the party shrinks significantly to only 2.0 ([1.8; 2.2] as 95% CI) when the voter perceives the party to be highly unified. In other words, to convince the voter that the party is ideologically close to her, the party has to be internally-unified while spreading ambiguous messages in campaigns. On the contrary, in the left panel where the party proposes a concrete policy platform, the voter perceives the party to be 3.2 units ([3.0; 3.4] as 95% CI) away when the party is considered as internally fighting and 2.4 ([2.3; 2.6] as 95% CI) units away when she believes there is no intra-party conflict within the unequivocal party. This suggest that when the party makes crystal clear campaign messages, voters have a relatively clear idea

¹³We set Actual Distance at its mean value when performing the prediction.

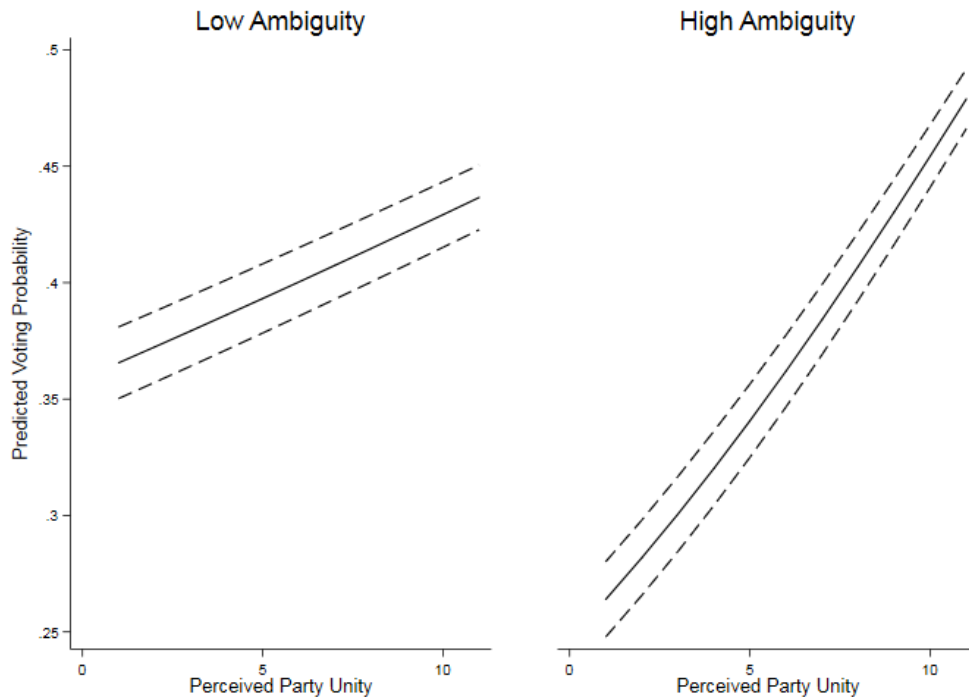
of where the party stands regardless of its intra-party cohesion.¹⁴

After revealing how perceived party unity conditions the effect of party ambiguity on voters' perceived distance to parties, LL further show how this conditioning effect ultimately structures respondents' vote intentions. Empirically, they apply a two-stage estimator that first evaluates the effect of perceived party unity on perceived policy distance (here: Model 3 in Table A2.1 from which Figure 2 is derived). Then, they derive the predicted perceived policy distance from the earlier model, and use it as an explanatory variable to predict respondents' vote intentions. We replicate their findings by following their modeling strategy. Specifically, we first predict the perceived distance to each party for every voter in our dataset. We then use it as the major independent variable in a conditional logit model to see if it affects vote choices. To obtain appropriate standard errors in the second-stage model, as LL did, we use the following bootstrap procedure: We first make a random draw with replacement from each country so that the size of the country sample is equivalent to the number of respondents from each country, and then, we perform the models described earlier based on these data. The same procedure is repeated 1,000 times to obtain the bootstrapped standard errors of the set of estimated coefficients. The estimated results are summarized in Table A2.2 in appendix A2. Again, the results are very close to that of LL's.

To illustrate how perceived party unity conditions the broad appeal strategy by shaping the respondent's perceived policy distance to the focal party and ultimately her intention to vote for the party, we follow LL by generating and plotting the predicted voting probability using the same set of parameters we employed in Figure 2. The corresponding results are presented in Figure 3. In the right panel, where a party's policy messages are vague, for the same party with an actual distance of 2.55 units to the voter, the probability that the voter casts a vote for the party is about 26% ([25%; 28%] as 95% CI) when the voter considers the party as internally fighting. Yet, if the party is instead perceived as highly unified, the voting probability goes up to 48% ([47%; 49%] as 95% CI). On the contrary, the effect of perceived unity is less pronounced when the party stands on a concrete policy platform. The probabilities for the voter to vote for this unequivocal party are 36% ([35%; 38%] as 95% CI) and 44% ([42%; 45%] as 95% CI) when the party is perceived to be internally fighting and internally cohesive, respectively.

¹⁴Our findings slightly deviate from the "Unambiguous Party Hypothesis" proposed by LL. We discover that perceived party unity still exerts a significant effect on perceived distance when a party stands on a concrete policy position, although the effect is fairly trivial in size.

Figure 3. Party Ambiguity, Perceived Party Unity, and Predicted Voting Probability (Replication of Lehrer and Lin (forthcoming, Figure 3))



Note: Results are based on Model 5 in Table A2.2 in the appendix. Low ambiguity refers to an ambiguity score of 0.13, high ambiguity to 0.43. All other variables are at their means or medians.

Summary and Discussion

In their recent work, Lehrer and Lin (forthcoming) communicate with a vibrant literature that studies party strategies as being ambiguous or unequivocal and the electoral implications of these strategies. In particular, they focus on the mechanism that Somer-Topcu (2015) proposes and demonstrate how intra-party politics can mitigate the effect of the “everything to everyone” strategy (i.e., being ambiguous on policies). While LL’s work has great implications for our understanding of parties’ electoral strategies, intra-party politics, and political representation, their empirical approach of drawing inference from only one country indeed invites doubt about the generalizability of their findings. In this research note, we re-visit LL’s work and re-evaluate their argument in a cross-national context by using a more diverse survey data from twelve countries in Western and Eastern Europe.

Our empirical endeavor generates a unique cross-national survey that allows us to replicate prior research. Our analyses reaffirm ST’s theory and LL’s refinement of it: The broad appeal strategy is indeed electorally beneficial to political parties, but it only works when it is executed by a unified party, since intra-party fights condition how party ambiguity structures voters’

perceived proximity to political parties, and ultimately, their vote choices in elections. The robust evidence we present in this note not only provides a solid empirical ground to LL's argument but also validates it in a cross-national context.

The findings of this note therefore has important implications for future research on intra-party politics, party competition, and political representation in modern democracies. First, Teorell (1999) argues that intra-party deliberations are necessary to determine what issues and policies parties should represent and advocate. Our findings, however, imply that political parties face strong incentives to avoid internal debates, since doing so may reveal to the public their true policy intentions that may further alienate potential supporters. Second, a prerequisite for the Responsible Party Model to work is that voters can generate meaningful electoral choices based on clear policy stances parties take. Again, we show empirically that political parties face strong incentives to embrace ambiguous policies, which is clearly a challenge to the mandate model of representative democracy (Mair 2008). Finally, what we and LL have discovered suggest that the electoral impact of parties' campaign strategies can be highly context-dependent. While our work focuses on the emerging role of intra-party politics in party competition (e.g., Greene and Haber 2015; Gherghina, Close, and Kopecký 2019; Steiner and Mader 2019), more sophisticated theories are needed for future work to better explore the electoral consequences of political parties' different campaign strategies, and by extension, their varied strategic behavior.

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